

Raising five leopard cubs in a human/animal conflict locality

Karabi Deka*

A caretaker phoned me reporting that two cubs didn't take their night meal -- it was the first time since I began looking after them that they were not eating. When I reached the centre I saw them in a corner, looking depressed. The male was a month old leopard cub with a female sibling. Both were rescued by local villagers from a sugarcane field of Nashik and later handed over to the forest department of Nashik. The forest staff could not trace the mother of the cubs in some few days so they sent the cubs to the Manikdoh Leopard Rescue Centre at Junnar. I was called in to take the cubs to the rescue centre. It was May 2008, one of the hottest months in Maharashtra. I and Mr. S. Edake, Manager of the rescue centre received the cubs after necessary paperwork and shifted them to plastic baskets. We covered baskets with wet towels for cooling and reducing stress during transport. The cubs slept the whole way except during the time when we stopped to feed them glucose water.

Manikdoh Leopard Rescue Centre was an initiative of the Maharashtra Forest Department, to rescue and rehabilitate problem leopards. Several such leopards were caught from Junnar, Ahmed Nagar and Nashik. Some were released back in the wild while other had to be kept. Wildlife SOS, a Delhi based NGO provided technical and veterinary support to these leopards. I was working as a veterinarian in the Wildlife SOS in the rescue centre.

The diet of any carnivore cubs is very sensitive issue since biologically they depend on their mother's milk for the initial 2-3 months. Keeping that in mind, I fed formulated milk for a month and later on chopped chicken meat. They stopped taking milk altogether after this and always waited expectantly for the meat to arrive. In their second month at the rescue centre, I fed finely chopped chicken meat three times a day, morning and evening meal in their night den which had a clean cemented floor, and afternoon meal in their enclosure where they stayed and played through the whole day. Their day enclosure was furnished with grass and small trees. The initial period of a hand raised cub's life is very sensitive, due to susceptibility to gastro enteritis and other life threatening conditions.

On the day, the cubs were not lively and had not eaten their morning meal. I administered medicine and waited their response. They did not take their afternoon meal and became very weak. I then administered intra-venous fluid and gave antibiotic injection. I tried feeding them chicken soup the following day and they gradually began to take it. Both of them had lost weight in those three days and looked quite unfit but both recovered well after that.

I developed a strong emotional bond with the cubs as it was my first experience of hand raising leopard cub. I felt they were so tiny, helpless and unaware of the outside world! Generally, I kept their meat

plate in front of them and then waited in a corner till they finish eating their meal. They became comfortable of my presence and came running towards me as soon as I entered the enclosure. They sat in my lap, crawled over my back and hide behind me whenever they heard an adult leopard growling from nearby enclosures. The male was very playful and a favorite of all our caretakers; the female was not so friendly and seemed not like to see the caretakers near her enclosure. I observed the male was dominating the female cub and had to be prevented from eating her share of food. He would not let the female come near me.

Small trees were added to their enclosure as enrichment as they broke all the branches of earlier small trees while playing. They liked climbing branches and jumping on the ground from the top. We also increased some enrichment by putting logs for them to sit and rest. After meals, they slept on their full stomachs on a branch with their legs hanging down. They normally collapsed into deep sleep after playing for an hour slept the whole day. They slept quietly at night and waited to come out of their night den till there was a light outside.

After a month, we were requested to accommodate another pair of cubs. These cubs were from Ahmednagar when their mother died after being trapped in a cage by the forest department. She was suspected to be a livestock lifter and in conflict with the villagers in the area. The two months old cubs were also a male and a female. After they reached the centre, the male could not walk as his posterior was partially paralyzed but the female was very active and playful. On enquiring about the male's condition, the forest staff related he had escaped from the cage, climbed over a big tree and got injured while trying to get down. He could not walk properly from that day. These cubs' enclosure was adjacent to that of the first two cubs. After that, I felt confident of handling the new arrivals.

The two enclosures were separated by wire mesh and the cubs could see and touch each other. After a few days, I opened the connecting gate between the two enclosures and allowed them together. I continued the lame male's treatment and he was recovering. Of the four cubs, the second female was very different from the other cubs. She was daring, active and unafraid. She liked the first male as a playmate as both of them were the more energetic cubs. During feeding time, she tried to snatch the meat from the plate in my hand instead of waiting for me to put it on the ground. She frightened caretakers away from the enclosure by hissing at them vigorously. She was an exceptional as well as an unpredictable cub. She was good and playful all the time but turned aggressive during

*Retired Veterinarian, Leopard Rescue Centre, Junnar, Maharashtra. Email: drkarabi@gmail.com

feeding time. Thus she required special care for her feeding and I used to devise different ways to feed her. The lame male and first female seemed frightened of her.

The cubs didn't like the attendants who cleaned their enclosures. They were afraid of the long broom they carried or annoyed by their cleaning their scats (used for marking territory) from their enclosure. They hissed and sat in a corner far away and waiting till caretakers left the enclosure. The cubs were growing fast; in the first month at the centre, they gained an average 0.5 kg body weight every week and from the second month onwards up to 6th month, their weight increased by an average of 1 kg per week. We administered vitamin and mineral supplement regularly along with their normal diet. After four months of age, they were fed separately but continued to play together very well. During feeding time they did not tolerate even their siblings and showed more interest in another's plate than their own. They lost their temporary teeth after five months but there was no empty space in their gum as the permanent teeth's emerged before the baby-teeth were shed. Gradually, their short shining hair was replaced by a puffy coat on their body. Playing time reduced and they preferred sitting and resting as they become heavier. There was little behavioural change towards me. Chopped beef meat was given daily and a broiler chicken on Sunday. The cubs played with the chicken, holding it in their mouth and running and jumping across the enclosure before peeling off the feathers for eating the flesh. In first few days, they consumed everything of the chicken including the feathers, but they learned to remove the feathers before devouring the meat. First male cub took the longest time to learn this compared to others.

Another young cub came in. Villagers found it in their fields and hid it in their house thinking mother leopard would leave the place if she could not find her cub. Later on they informed the forest staff who then brought the cub to the rescue centre. It was a small but healthy male cub whose eyes had barely opened. Once I held him he cried as soon as I left and would crawl over the floor of the entire room trying to follow my voice. I asked a caretaker from the centre to be near him all the time to feed him and to attend him. Next day villagers informed that an adult female was roaming around the area where the cub was found. I along with the forest staff then decided to leave the cub at the same place where it was collected. I put the cub in a wooden box with leaves and grasses and went along with forest staff to place it where it had been picked up and removed the cover. It was almost dark when we left the box with the cub in the field and we kept watching so that some other carnivores roaming nearby did not harm it. For an hour we stayed with the cub meowing constantly. I was trying to adjust myself and my eyes to that particular place in moonlight as night engulfed the area. After few hours we heard a tiny growl. All of us became alert and kept our eyes and ears open for any movement nearby the place where we had left

the cub and, surprised, we spotted a full grown leopard. The cub stopped crying as soon as it heard the leopard approaching. I was very apprehensive as I was not sure whether this leopard was the mother or some other transient individual. The leopard slowly neared towards the cub keeping a wary eyes on nearby surroundings. Then she began sniffing and licking the cub and ultimately began nursing her. All of us felt a great relief when we left the place. We had accomplished a near impossible task of reuniting a cub with its mother in natural conditions. Though the leopard sensed human presence in the place near her cub, she dared to come to her cub and waited there till we left to take her cub away.

Ironically, it was decided to keep the previous four cubs in permanent captivity as the whereabouts of their mother was not known. It is always risky for cubs to be released in the wild at that young age since they totally depend on their mothers to hunt and also might become easy prey for other predators. Also many leopards were already there in that area!! It would introduce additional conflict by releasing untrained cubs in wild condition. Naturally villagers do not want leopards near their habitation as they kill livestock for want of natural prey. The villagers will take a cub found without the mother and give them to forest staff so that they can be kept in captivity, thinking mother leopard will leave their place if she does not find her cubs. However, these leopards have adjusted their lives in human-dominated landscapes as it was the leopards territory. Collecting cubs is not the solution of the problem; if one leopard leaves the place, some other leopard will come and occupy the place. Also the mother will come into early estrus after losing her cubs and produce another litter of cubs very soon. This situation will continue unless we find solutions to the increasing conflict problems.

Within few months the cubs I reared had grown into subadults and were growling like adult leopards. I was astonished to see the behavioural changes within these months in the cubs. They still were comfortable in my presence although not that of others. Gradually I started minimizing my interaction with them as they had become large, heavy and powerful adult leopards! I felt much satisfaction in raising the cubs to their adulthood and seeing them grow from tiny cubs to mature adults.

Epilogue: Rescue centers' goal usually is to provide food, housing and medical care for the orphaned, rescued and ailing animals, and are generally meant for animals that need medical care before being released in to the wild. Animals which are physically unfit and have a history of frequent conflict with humans are also kept in a rescue centre and in many occasions are sent to a zoo later. Whenever a wild animal strays public areas, common people panic and many times an innocent animal is killed by the excited public. This type of incidents is common in case of wild carnivores. It is advisable to have rescue centres in such areas where people and animal compete for living, with the animal often on the losing side.